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VOC FOR IOP/FN

BACKGROUNDER NO. 1-0244 FEBRUARY 25, 1976
JOSEPH SULLIVAN

NORTHERN MARIANAS COMMONWEALTH: ONE STEP NEARER

ANNCR:

IN WASHINGTON, THE SENATE TUESDAY (FEBRUARY 24) VOTED TO GRANT COMMONWEALTH STATUS TO THE NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS... CLEARING AWAY STILL ANOTHER OBSTACLE TO THE FIRST TERRITORIAL EXPANSION OF THE UNITED STATES IN A HALF CENTURY. VOA'S JOSEPH SULLIVAN HAS THIS BACKGROUND REPORT.

VOICE:

THE SENATE VOTE CAME JUST ONE YEAR AFTER REPRESENTATIVES OF THE UNITED STATES AND THE MARIANA ISLANDS SIGNED A COVENANT ON EVENTUAL POLITICAL UNION BETWEEN THE TWENTY-ONE-ISLAND PACIFIC GROUP AND THE UNITED STATES. THE COVENANT WAS APPROVED IN A PLEBISCITE HELD IN THE ISLANDS LAST JUNE.

THE MARIANA CHAIN, ALONG WITH THE CAROLINE AND MARSHALL ISLAND GROUPS, HAVE BEEN ADMINISTERED BY THE UNITED STATES SINCE 1947 UNDER A UNITED NATIONS TRUSTEESHIP. THE ISLANDS ARE MORE THAN TWO-THIRDS THE DISTANCE FROM NORTH AMERICA TO THE ASIAN MAINLAND. GUAM -- THE LARGEST AND MOST HEAVILY INHABITED ISLAND -- IS ALREADY A UNITED STATES TERRITORY AND THEREFORE WOULD NOT BECOME PART OF THE NEW COMMONWEALTH.

UNDER THE COMMONWEALTH COVENANT, THE FOURTEEN THOUSAND PEOPLE OF THE NORTHERN MARIANAS WOULD BE GRANTED FULL RIGHTS AND PRIVILEGES AS U.S. CITIZENS. BUT THEY WOULD HAVE THE CHOICE OF BECOMING AMERICAN CITIZENS OF FOREIGN NATIONALS OF THE UNITED STATES. THE COMMONWEALTH WOULD HAVE SELF-GOVERNMENT, EXCEPT ON MATTERS OF FOREIGN POLICY AND MILITARY

AFFAIRS. IT WOULD ALSO HAVE ITS OWN CONSTITUTION AND LEGAL SYSTEM.

THERE ARE OTHER STEPS TO BE TAKEN BEFORE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NORTHERN MARIANA COMMONWEALTH IS FINAL. THESE INCLUDE THE DRAFTING AND APPROVAL OF A CONSTITUTION AND THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE CONSTITUTION IN A PLEBISCITE. AND, FINALLY, THE ARRANGEMENT MUST BE SUBMITTED TO THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL, WHICH EXERCISES ULTIMATE AUTHORITY OVER CHANGES IN THE STATUS OF U.N. TRUST TERRITORIES.

THE IDEA OF FORMAL TIES WITH THE UNITED STATES HAS BEEN ON THE MINDS OF THE PEOPLE OF THE MARIANAS FOR A LONG TIME. STILL, THE NEGOTIATIONS TO ESTABLISH SUCH A UNION HAVE NOT BEEN WITHOUT SOME OPPPOSITION. BUT THE FACT REMAINS THAT THE PLEBISCITE HELD IN THE ISLANDS LAST YEAR AND THE COMING CONSTITUTIONAL PLEBISCITE REPRESENT THE FIRST TIME IN MODERN HISTORY THAT THE MARIANA ISLANDERS HAVE HAD A FREE CHOICE TO DECIDE THEIR POLITICAL DESTINY.

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